Rough Draft: Savannah Romero

*Identifying and Combating Sex Trafficking in Washington State*

“I can tell you some of the things they did to me and other girls and woman, but there is still much that I cannot speak of. These men gang raped us. They raped us with dogs. They raped us with knives and guns and beer bottles. They tie us down, chain us to bedposts and basement poles and each other. They make us eat shit and maggots and urine. They rape us with masks on their face. They rape us in the name of Satan and Hitler and De Sade… We are dirty, ruined, despised, the whores of the earth. The men who use us throw us away. The rest of you turn your backs, avert your eyes, pretend not to see, go on your own way. You leave us to the predators.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

The previous testimony is that of a woman named Christine Stark from Minnesota in 1997. When many Americans think of sex trafficking they imagine countries such as China, Cambodia, Nepal, Ukraine, parts of Africa and South American. What we fail to realize is sex trafficking is a global issue with negative impacts right here, locally and in the communities and neighborhoods of the State of Washington. According to Melinda Giovengo, the Executive Director of YouthCare, out of an estimated 500 young people who are victims of sex trafficking in Seattle and King County, over 320 of them have been identified. [[2]](#footnote-2) In the past decade, a new interest in domestic sex trafficking has been developed, but the majority of citizens are still unaware of it. Sex trafficking negatively impacts our communities and our youth. The critical keys to decreasing sexual exploitation include increasing awareness, educating others on the negative impacts, and engaging citizens in implementing solutions.

*Where Is It Happening?*

Tarna Derby-McCurtain of the FBI’s Innocence Lost Task Force says, “The vast majority (of victims) are from here and are trafficked here.” Sex trafficking is happening all over Washington but it seems to be more prominent in the Seattle and Western Washington area. “Seattle is a major purchase zone,” according to former congresswoman, Linda Smith who started Shared Hope International. Sex slaves can be found in a variety of environments such as massage parlors, escort services, bar/strip clubs, brothels, in pornography, as well as on the street or “the track.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Anyone would be able to note one or more of these businesses in their own community but perhaps they never question whether the people working in these places could be victims of sex trafficking.

*What Does it Look Like?*

If made aware, it is quite likely that the greater community and state of Washington would be against sex trafficking, so why aren’t people taking more action to prevent it? It is because sex trafficking is fairy knew in recognition as an issue. It isn’t like substance abuse where we learn about the risks and how to avoid it in fifth grade through DARE. People aren’t taking action because they don’t know what sex trafficking looks like or how to recognize it. In my research I found common indicators that a person is being sex trafficked. I looked at multiple websites dedicated to ending sex trafficking/human trafficking such as Share Hope International and Humantrafficking.org.

A victim of sexual exploitation may be:

* Chronically running away from home.
* Making references to frequent travel to other cities.
* Exhibiting bruises or other physical trauma,
* Withdrawn behavior,
* Show signs of depression or fear,
* Malnourished,
* Lacks control over schedule,
* Has a “boy friend” who is noticeably older,
* Showing signs of drug addiction,
* Changing the way they dress to more provocative clothing,
* Has expensive things without an explanation to where they came from
* Young because children are vulnerable and gullible

Above all, the most important indicator that a person is being sexually exploited is if someone else is using violence, manipulation, and/or threats to force a victim to provide commercial sex, and to prevent the victim from leaving the situation. [[4]](#footnote-4) Education on the signs of sex trafficking is the critical first step to bringing about awareness and actions that will combat this negative issue in our communities. When things like this are noticed it is important for other people to take action and recognize that someone around them could be a victim of sex trafficking. The more people are educated on how to identify it, the less it will go unnoticed.

*Washington Government Combats Sex Trafficking*

In 2003 Washington state passed a law criminalizing human trafficking, stating that it is a serious felony to recruit, harbor, transport, or obtain any person for labor or services using force, fraud or coercion. [[5]](#footnote-5) Eight years later, Governor Christine Gregoire signed two bills into law. The first (SB-5482) helps ensure housing, assistance programs, and appropriate funds to trafficked victims. The second (SB-5546) expands the legal qualifications for human trafficking, and its passage now allows the sale of human organs, forced labor, involuntary servitude, commercial sexual abuse of a minor and criminal sex acts to be punishable under Washington state human trafficking laws.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*What Washington State Needs to Do*

Although Washington State was the first state to pass a law criminalizing human trafficking, including sex trafficking, it wasn’t until 2009 that someone was actually prosecuted under the law.[[7]](#footnote-7) This begs the question, is Washington state government really doing all they can to combat sex trafficking or is there something more they could be doing? Yes, we can sign a law into action but without any enforcement then the law is useless and ineffective. We need local officials to be educated on sex trafficking and trained in identifying it. According to seattleagainstslavery.org “Most cases prosecuted by DOJ to date have been identified by line-level police officers who encounter sex traffickers or their victims during the normal course of operations: during routine traffic stops, on domestic violence calls, while inspecting liquor licenses, and when intercepting truant children.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The first line of prevention starts with our law enforcement. The government should design training programs dedicated to teaching local law enforcement on how to identify sex trafficking and how to handle it so that we are able to use the laws that have been passed to prosecute the traffickers.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*What Can YOU Do to Help fight Sex Trafficking*

The average age of a child forced into the sex trade in the Seattle area is 13 years old, but there have been victims as young as 11.[[10]](#footnote-10) These children fall into the sex industry by deception and abduction. In April 2010 an article was written about a Washington teenager by the name of Briana. She was in the process of being lured and tricked into being a sex slave. On a spontaneous trip to Seattle she met a group of guys who persuaded her to spend the night. After that night she agreed to dance at a Seattle strip club for two nights. She gave the men who had lured her there most of the money she was paid. Briana began staying with these men and when her cell phone began to die she made a suspicious phone call to her ex-boyfriend to come pick her up so she could go home to get her phone charger. What she didn’t know is that her ex-boyfriend would be bringing her back to his house to surprise Briana with a full on intervention that included his parents, her parents, and Linda Smith. With the help of the founder of Hope International, Briana’s friends and family were able to show her what was happening to her and the danger she was putting herself in. Briana admits her ignorance; “I was just walking blindly into this trap.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Perhaps if Briana had known about sex trafficking prior to her encounter with the traffickers, then she would have been able to identify what was happening to her and how to stop it. That is why it is extremely important for our communities and schools to educate children on sex trafficking and how to identify it. Children are extremely vulnerable to being trafficked in the sex industry because of their obliviousness, tendency to be gullible, and of purchasers’ high demand for child prostitutes.[[12]](#footnote-12) There is an urgency and demand for schools to teach awareness of sex trafficking so that the children in our community can be armed with protection by having the ability to recognize it when they see it.

*Conclusion*

Sex trafficking in Washington is a huge safety issue for the people in our community. We need to take action now to keep the girls, boys, and woman safe in our community by teaching awareness. With education comes power, the power to protect and to prevent. There are so many people that are ignorant to the sex trafficking and other forms of human trafficking that is taking place in their communities. It is vital that advances are being made in legislative action and local law enforcement to ensure that the laws being passed are effectively and properly being utilized. As a community, in school education, awareness of the evidence of the issue, and utilizing resources to take personal action, are all ways sex trafficking can be reduced.

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